

Experts discuss Portsmouth's urban future

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The benefits of high-quality, people-oriented planning and design in urban spaces were discussed at a University event bringing together academic experts and local industry, government and community leaders.

The event at Portsmouth's Guildhall was the second of the University's industry breakfasts on the theme of the urban future of Portsmouth.

Dean of the Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, Professor Catherine Harper, set the scene from a University perspective. The University has deep roots in the city, and she highlighted that 2017 would mark a very important point in its history – the 25th year since it formally gained university status. These roots meant that as a 'University Quarter' continued to be established in the city, the University was keen that it should remain a very open campus in which students, staff and the wider public freely mingled.

This theme was picked up by the University's professor of sustainable architecture and director of the Cluster for Sustainable Cities, Steffen Lehmann. "Portsmouth has too many closed, fenced-off spaces, and we need more access to green spaces in particular," he said.

Many people would have experience of European cities that were very different, he said, picking out Stockholm, Marseilles and Barcelona as examples. He noted that the UK was catching up – highlighting both Paternoster Square and the public Sky Garden at the top of the 'Walkie Talkie' building in London.

He concluded with a plea that high quality public space should be a driver for planning and design in cities.



Photo of the speakers at the Industry Breakfast at Guildhall, from left to right: Prof Steffen Lehmann, Prof Graham Galbraith, Flick Drummond MP, Bev Lucas, Elad Eisenstein and Jason Syrett.

People should be put first in urban design, said the next speaker, Elad Eisenstein, Director of Urban Design at Mecanoo Architects. "In the past, design was about purpose first," he said. But modern life saw purposes change frequently and rapidly, he said, and so it was vital that modern design had people at its heart.

This thinking had been central to a redevelopment at the University of Delft in the Netherlands, he told the audience. A busy road that divided the campus had been replaced with a green, public space – the Mekelpark. The park’s design encourages people to use it as a place to relax on their own or meet informally, as well as acting to connect the various parts of the campus.

Similar thinking had gone into the Library of Birmingham development. Key considerations had been that Birmingham is a ‘young’ and international city, with dominant but fragmented infrastructure. It was intended that the Library be at the social heart of the city, as a place to “meet, interact and exchange”, he said.

He picked out two design principles. Public spaces and buildings along a ‘red line’ were to be coherently linked through design; and the Library itself was designed so that all of the bottom was publicly accessible, with offices and storage spaces on upper levels.

The audience then heard from Bev Lucas, Project Manager at Portsmouth City Council, about a recent local example, the Hotwalls Studios. In 1961, this old military site had been bought by the Council. Although it had been slightly opened up, it had largely been unused other than for storage. Over time, the arches had come to be used informally by artists and, she explained, this had stimulated the thinking behind its current adaptive reuse as formal studios.

Again, the connection with the wider public had been important. The arches had been open to public access, and connected by a continuous walkway. She explained how this had been recognised in the design. The studios have glass frontages, encouraging the public both to look in and enter, and with windows from one to the other providing views through the length of the studios. Dr Lucas said that this was felt to be successful, with a noticeable increase in public use and interaction in the space.

Former Portsmouth architecture student, Jason Syrett, gave the final presentation. He explained how he had chosen to come to Portsmouth to study because he liked how it was a campus within a city. He then described the ongoing redevelopment of London’s Kings Cross site, which he was involved in over the last ten years. “The site is very big – 67 acres,” he said, explaining that this had required a “slow, incremental and mixed-use” development involving the reclamation of both land and buildings for which the original use was no longer needed.

A key feature of this old industrial site is that it had been a void in the city, he said. “There was little relationship to the surrounding areas.” Of particular interest to Portsmouth was the incorporation of a university into the redevelopment – the University of the Arts London. He emphasised the importance of public access to the spaces – in the flows of people can be seen commuters, students, office workers, visitors and even school pupils on their scooters.

He emphasised the importance of recognising that large scale, long term developments would be implemented over periods of both economic prosperity and decline.

Local MP Flick Drummond then provided some comments from a perspective of political leadership. She made a particular plea for a social aspect to development plans. She praised the University for initiating discussions about Portsmouth’s future.

The discussion had been on public spaces, she noted, but she hoped that similar attention would be given to the impact of internal space on people’s wellbeing and mental health. She made reference to her early life in the Middle East, and the changes she had seen there. She suggested that Portsmouth might look to Dubai for some inspiration on how high-quality buildings can transform an area.

She also voiced her concern at the impact of traffic on air pollution, noise and quality of life. The Autolib electric car-sharing scheme in Paris might be something that Portsmouth could replicate, she suggested.

Summing up, University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Graham Galbraith, returned to the particular aspects of the University’s own development plans for the University Quarter. He emphasised that the University wanted an integrated approach of working with all others in the city, telling the audience: “The University is now at a watershed moment. We have a deep sense of the university’s responsibility to the city.”